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ABSTRACT

Paradoxically, linguists' speculations about sex differences in language use are highly plausible and yet have received little empirical support from well controlled studies. An experiment was designed to correct a flaw in earlier methodologies by sampling precisely the kinds of situations in which predicted differences (e.g., swearing, questioning, politeness) might be expected. College students were asked to indicate exactly how they would respond in a series of typical campus situations. They were also asked to describe the experimental room. No sex differences were found in any measured aspects of reported speech style, e.g., politeness, questioning, swearing, use of "feminine" words, though some differences in content emerged in the descriptive passages. Consistent with earlier results, women responded more to other people; men, to physical dimensions. The failure of this and other laboratory-based studies to demonstrate consistent differences between men's and women's styles suggests that sex-based styles are not invariant, but rather are continuua similar to those posited by sociolinguists regarding such variables as formality of situation. To record sex-specific language, researchers should abandon the sex neutral laboratory and collect data in sex-specific settings such as baby showers or men's poker games. (Author)

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Why Sex-Based Language Differences are Elusive

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An interesting paradox has emerged from the response of empirical researchers to claims made by linguists pioneering in the study of sex differences in language use. On the one side of the paradox, claims that male and female speakers of English differ in their tendencies to choose certain vocabulary items or syntactic variants have strong intuitive appeal. I will draw examples of such claims from two sources, Jespersen (1922) and Lakoff (1975). Jespersen claimed that women are more likely than men to use euphemisms, for example to refer to a statement as a "dreadful fib" when a man would call it an "infernal lie." He also believed that when surprised, a woman would say, "Goodness gracious," when a man would say, "Great Scott." In a more contemporary idiom, Lakoff has pointed to the tendency of women to use weaker particles, such as "Oh dear," while men select stronger particles such as "Oh shit." Lakoff also argues that certain adjectives, such as "charming," "lovely," or "adorable" are more common in women's speech than in men's. She believes that women are more likely than men to use precise terms for color, e.g., "mauve" or "ecru." Claims regarding syntactic variants include Jesperson's that women are particularly apt to use a stressed "so" in expressions like "It is so lovely." Lakoff says that women are more likely to use tag questions, e.g., to say, "It looks like rain, doesn't it?" when a man would say, "It looks like rain." She also suggests that women choose more polite and formal variants than

men do, e.g., "Would you please close the door?" rather than, "Close the door."

Most theorists have not been very specific in characterizing the nature of the differences, and often speak loosely of men's and women's "language." Thorne and Henley (1975) suggest that we speak of a "female style," referring to Ervin-Tripp's (1972) definition of style as "the co-occurrent changes at various levels of linguistic structure within the language." Some theorists, e.g., Lakoff (1975), Key (1975), Thorne and Henley (1975) and Conklin (1973) have suggested that aspects of the social situation may influence the degree of sex-specificity of an utterance, but this idea has not been well-developed. Though not always well conceptualized, the notion that there are sex differences in patterns of choosing lexical and syntactic variants seems to have been widely accepted.

The other side of the paradox is that these claims have not received much support from empirical studies designed to demonstrate sex differences in oral or written language under controlled conditions. Because of time limitations, I will not attempt a study-by-study review, but rather will refer to Thorne and Henley's (1975) excellent annotated bibliography, and will attempt to summarize the trends emerging from the studies. The most impressive generalization, one which emerges consistently across experiments with varied methodologies, is that women are more apt to use words referring to feelings, motives, or other internal states, while men are more apt to refer to concrete objects, discrete actions, or physically measurable

dimensions such as time, space, or number (Gleser et al., 1959; Barron, 1971; Swacker, 1975; Warshay, 1972; Wood, 1966). Since most experimental procedures allowed subjects considerable latitude in choice of topic, the results may simply reflect the fact that, because of differences in upbringing, values or daily activities, men and women may find different topics to be interesting and worthy of discussion. More important, these differences do not appear to be the kind of stylistic differences which Jespersen, Lakoff, and other theorists were positing. Though they have not drawn this distinction in detail, perusal of their examples reveals that they are concerned with situations where men and women choose different words or phrases to communicate essentially the same information, not with decisions to talk about different topics. There are a few isolated findings of stylistic differences, e.g., Swacker's (1975) report that in a monologue task, men and women handled topic shifts somewhat differently, and that women were more likely to qualify their number terms with "about" or a phrase like "five or six." However, I haven't found any well controlled demonstration that women avoid swear words, rely on "feminine adjectives," ask more questions, or use more polite forms of address than men do. Swacker's finding that women "hedged" their number terms is the one documented example of women speaking with less certainty than men, an idea which is important in Lakoff's characterization of women's speech.

As my students and I discussed these findings, none of us felt comfortable concluding that other sex-based differences

simply did not exist. All of our informal observations of the world around us argued against that conclusion. It occurred to us that the problem with the data might be one of event sampling. Most of the hypothesized differences are likely to occur only in specific situations. Politeness is likely to surface when one person is making a request of the other, and swear words to occur when a person has just received an unpleasant surprise. The monologue tasks typically used by researchers may simply have not provided experimental subjects with the opportunity to emit the kinds of utterances in which sex differences might be observed. Thus, in an effort to improve on existing methodologies, we designed an experimental task to elicit specifically the types of responses in which differences in levels of politeness, profanity, etc. have been hypothesized to occur. Our strategy was to have men and women place themselves in imaginary situations where we specified the setting, the person being addressed, and the speaker's goals in the interaction. We then could determine whether, in the same setting and with the same message to convey, men and women would choose different styles for communicating the message.

We presented our experiment to the subjects, college undergraduates, as an investigation of students' adjustment to the university environment, and asked them to tell us exactly what they would say and do in several situations that might occur on campus. The situations and categories for which they were scored are presented on the handout. Because we were also interested in learning whether sex differences in descriptive

writing would emerge if the topic were specified, a final item asked subjects to write a brief paragraph about the room they were sitting in. All experimental items were presented in a mimeographed booklet, and subjects responded in writing.

Our plan was to conduct the same experiment twice, scoring the data from the first sample in the inductive way which is characteristic of most studies. This has the advantage of letting the data "speak for themselves" in suggesting scoring categories or even new hypotheses. To avoid the methodological problems involved in using this method alone--particularly a risk of generalizing from chance variation and a risk of experimenter bias, we then planned to cross-validate all statistically significant findings on a second sample using a "blind" scoring procedure for the second sample. We had 37 students in the first sample, 28 in the second. We used the Chi Square test of significance except where cell frequencies were less than five; there, we used the Fisher Exact Probabilities test.[1]

The first obstacle to our plan emerged when the first sample of responses to situations yielded no differences statistically significant at the .05 level. There were several trends at the .10 level or better. These included the tendency for women, but not men, to make self-depreciating statements, to say "please," to address a person by name before beginning to talk to him, and to mention their demeanor during the conversation, e.g., "with a very serious expression." Though we found these differences interesting, we also had to remember that they were statistically nonsignificant, and that we thus could not

safely regard them as anything other than chance variations. Also, we were puzzled by the number of categories revealing no differences, or even differences in the opposite direction from the predicted one. Nowhere were women more likely to excuse themselves, apologize, smile, ask questions, or avoid shouting or swearing. In fact, there was even a slight tendency for our women to out-swear and out-shout the men.

Had we followed our original plan, we would have simply abandoned the situation items at this point, since there were no significant differences to cross validate. However, since several differences had approached significance, we were curious to learn whether they would emerge in a second sample. We were even more curious about the expected differences which had not appeared. Therefore, we decided to cross validate on all sixteen of our variables, looking for confirmation of the pattern of results we had found in the first sample.

Cross validating with blind scoring, we found no statistically significant differences in the second sample. There was no confirmation for the trends which had looked so promising in the first sample. Wondering whether our samples were perhaps too small, we finally collapsed all subjects from both samples and tested for significance on all sixteen variables with 65 subjects. The only significant finding from this post hoc and altogether inelegant analysis was in the reverse direction from the expected one; women were more likely than men to address a teaching assistant by first name, while men were more likely to use a title and last name. In summary, then,

our analysis of the situation items gave no support for any hypothesized differences in men's and women's speech.

Our analysis of the first sample's treatment of the descriptive paragraph also revealed a dearth of stylistic differences. Unlike Swacker, we found no differences in handling numbers. We found no sex differences in the use of color terms, qualifiers, questions, negation, etc. We did find several statistically significant differences in topics which were discussed, despite the rather strict instruction to describe the room.[2] Women were more apt to discuss people in the room, men to describe the room alone. Women talked more about non-visual stimuli, while men talked about more spatial relationships and were more prone to offer evaluative comments. Our attempts to cross validate these findings has to date been thwarted by practical problems. We can say, though, that we have tentative evidence for different topic choices in a situation which seemed to control for topic, and that our findings are consistent with results of previous research. These findings are interesting in that they seem to suggest that men's and women's characteristic sex roles may pervade even solitary reflection and writing, but since they are essentially content choices, they say little about the stylistic differences which were the focus of the study.

At this point you may be asking yourself why I am here reading this paper--a psychologist with a long list of unsupported hypotheses, and--what's worse--a feminist who has inadvertently produced data consistent with the notions of Parsons

and Bales (1955). The most important point I have to make is not, obviously, why my experiment worked so well, but rather why it, like earlier ones, failed so thoroughly to reveal sex differences in anything except topic choice. Essentially I believe that, in designing this experiment, I, like earlier researchers, was following a thoroughly inadequate theoretical model which generated an equally inappropriate methodology. In simply looking for sex differences, we were following the common assumption that the styles of speech characteristic of the sexes should be discernible whenever and wherever one looks for them.

Instead of looking for data within a naive sex differences model, I propose that we need to move considerations of social setting and topic and conversation to a central point in our theory. I argue that we need to think of the male and female language styles as two dialect continua, similar in some respects to those associated with regional or ethnic speech.[3] Until the work of Labov, Shuy and other pioneering sociolinguists, these phenomena were also regarded as monolithic and invariant. Then these linguists demonstrated that the situation is far more complex; rather than speak invariantly in a "dialect," a speaker actually commands a continuum, ranging over a variety of speech styles more or less removed from standard speech and depending on the social context. If we look for sex-based dialect continua, the extreme of the female continuum can be observed at baby showers or in conversations about fashion, while the extreme end of the male continuum is

likely to be heard in poker games or men's bar conversations. Each speaker shifts styles according to the situation, and can move from sex-specific speech to the relatively sex-neutral language of the business world, the classroom or the laboratory.

And that, of course, is my explanation of the paradox that we have found no differences where we firmly believe them to exist. Our beliefs reflect casual observations in informal, sex-specific situations which elicit sex-specific language, while our data come from the laboratory, a formal, sex-neutral situation. Two attributes of the laboratory situation would be to elicit sex-neutral speech. First, the laboratory, like most of the university, is a sex-neutral situation and thus elicits speech appropriate to it. Second, when people know they are being observed, they are particularly careful not to deviate from norms of appropriate behavior (Labov, 1970).

To describe sex-specific styles, we must go into the field and observe them systematically in situations where they are likely to occur. Following Labov, we must also look for speakers whose habitual usage is less contaminated by sex-neutral language than that of students who spend their days in the relatively neutral sphere of the university. Housewives and construction workers would be better sources of data.

This is not to say that there is no research left to be done in the laboratory. Several components of the model I am working on require experimental investigation, and my students and I are pursuing lab studies as well as field research. For example, I believe that men are accorded more leeway than women

in shifting to sex specific variants in a sex-neutral situation. Compare the impact of a man's "Our committee did a hell of a good job" with a woman's "Our committee did a perfectly lovely job." I also believe that seemingly neutral language is actually heavily infused by the male style. Consider the language of everyday metaphors, where one can speak of an idea being "in left field" but not "in the wrong cannister." The implications of this imbalance for male and female speakers need to be explored. If my assumptions are correct, the neutral sphere is in some respects an inhibiting speech environment for women, who are less familiar than men with the elements borrowed into the neutral style from the male continuum, but who nevertheless cannot shift to the sex specific end of their own continuum without inviting ridicule.

To conclude, then, in place of a vague sex-difference model which has led investigators nowhere but down the garden path, I offer my model of sex-based dialect continua and a neutral style infused by the male style as one with testable consequences for laboratory and field research. Though the model is still in an early stage of development, it offers promise for explaining patterns of linguistic variation in a way that clarifies some of the subtle obstacles women experience when they attempt to make their voices heard in the worlds of business, scholarship or public policy.

Footnotes

1. I am indebted to Denise Davis, John Dzamba, Harvey Moss, Mindy Roshon, Tom Shultz, Cindy Thompson and Miriam Thompson for their help in gathering and analyzing data, and to Terrie Lewis for clerical assistance.

2. Miriam Thompson took major responsibility for scoring the descriptive paragraphs, and the discovery of these differences owes much to her careful work.

3. Discussions with my colleague, Peter Menzel, were of great help to me as I began to formulate this model.

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Handout

1. While waiting for class to begin, you would like to initiate conversation with an attractive person of the opposite sex sitting near you. You do this by saying something about a topic of current interest.

	First Sample		Second Sample	
	Men (N=18)	Women (N=19)	Men (N=13)	Women (N=15)
Opening with question	78%	84%	85%	87%
Smiling	28	37	31	47
Self-depreciating statement	0	21	0	0
Tag question	0	0	0	0

2. You have missed a lecture in a course and want to get a copy of the notes because there is a test tomorrow. You do not know anybody else in the class, and the teacher is out of town. Walking into the locker room to change clothes for your swimming class, you meet another class member who is walking out.

	First Sample		Second Sample	
	Men (N=18)	Women (N=19)	Men (N=13)	Women (N=15)
"Please"	0%	21%	0%	0%
"Excuse me" or other apologetic statements	0	11	0	7

3. You have had an appointment for dental surgery for 6 weeks. Your professor, Dr. Julian Elliot, has now scheduled a test for that time and you need to reschedule the test.

	First Sample		Second Sample	
	Men (N=18)	Women (N=19)	Men (N=13)	Women (N=15)
Address by title, name or "sir"	39%	68%	46%	60%
"Please"	0	11	0	0
Apology	6	11	6	13
Demeanor	11	37	8	13

4. You are walking from class and you round a corner just in time to see a truck back into your bike and begin to drive away.

	First Sample		Second Sample	
	Men (N=18)	Women (N=19)	Men (N=13)	Women (N=15)
Swearing	33%	42%	31%	7%
Shouting	50	63	38	60

5. This quarter your favorite instructor is Jane/Jack Thompson, a TA in the math department. After class you notice she/he is leaving without her/his briefcase and you want to get her/his attention before she/he is out the door.

	First Sample		Second Sample	
	Men (N=18)	Women (N=19)	Men (N=13)	Women (N=15)
Address by title	61%	47%	92%	58%
Address by first name	17	37	8	40
Apologies	11	11	8	7
Shouting	22	32	38	13

6. In this section subjects were asked to describe the room they were sitting in. Data are available only for the first sample.

	Men (N=15)	Women (N=19)
Noting nonvisual stimuli*	40%	58%
Evaluating room*	87	47
Referring to special relationships*	60	21
Mentioning people in room*	21	58
Referring to colors	20	26
Ascribing emotion to room	27	26
Using indefinite qualifiers, e.g., "sort of"	60	58
Using exact numbers	20	21
Using approximate numbers	27	10
Use of negation	47	53
Use of questions	0	11

*Statistically significant at .05 level.